

the second subject is combined with continuing fragments of the first. A gentle last reference to the quartet's initial theme is made by the cello just before the coda's forceful concluding restatement of the finale's own opening flourish.

During the twenty-six years which separated the composition of Pizzetti's *Second Quartet* from that of his *First*, his inspiration reached its highest level not only in the three important chamber works mentioned in the first paragraph but also in the operas *Fedra* (1909-12) and *Debora e Jaelle* (1915-21), in the magnificent *Messa di Requiem* (1922-23) for unaccompanied chorus, in some memorably beautiful, sometimes highly dramatic songs, and so on. Naturally these intervening experiences had the effect of modifying his attitude to inherited conventions considerably, and it is hardly surprising that the four movements of the second quartet are less straightforwardly traditional in structure than are those of its predecessor. Nevertheless the later work does contain features which suggest a *rapprochement* with (and re-appraisal of) various aspects of the great string quartets of the nineteenth century, not excluding those of Beethoven; and Pizzetti no longer seems as inclined here to write for the instruments in quasi-operatic terms as he was in his major chamber compositions of 1918-25. Nor is there a known extra-musical programme underlying this quartet, any more than there was in the *First*.

The unexpectedly German-sounding chromatic intensity of the first movement's slow introduction is established at once when the note-sequence D-E flat-D-F-E natural, on the cello, is immediately imitated by the second violin playing A-B flat-A-C-B natural. The fact that the last four of these notes are called B-A-C-H in German terminology is unlikely to be a coincidence. Much of the introductory section is based on various forms of this phrase at different pitches; however, when faster music takes over in a passage marked *Assai mosso ma non agitato*, the mood becomes more serene – embodied in a theme whose mingled triple and duplet rhythms again have a characteristically

Pizzettian lilt. One might suppose this to be the main first subject in a traditional sonata structure, and a seeming second subject is in due course introduced by the viola, using dotted rhythms. However, the subsequent course of events, both thematically and tonally, is far from conventional: at the beginning of what might have become a normal development section, a colourful new musical image is suddenly introduced, with drum-like repeated notes on the cello answered by soft, solemn horn-like calls on the second violin, and contrasting faster fanfares on the first.

What ensues may at times seem more like a tone-poem for string quartet than a purely abstract piece: one may even be tempted to accept Guido M. Gatti's fanciful description of some of this music, in his useful little book on Pizzetti, as suggesting "a crowded hunt through forest and meadow, mysterious shady places and sudden clearings open to the sun", (An English version of Gatti's book was published in London by Dennis Dobson in 1951.) As the first movement draws towards its close, earlier themes, including that of the slow introduction, are brought back, but not in the traditional order: the final return of the supposed "first subject", back in its original D major, does not occur until the very end of the movement.

The slow second movement is even harder to relate straightforwardly to traditional musical structures, although clearly-defined recurrent themes do play their part in its densely-woven, sometimes rather turgid texture. From time to time a gently undulating quasi-Gregorian motif, first presented (unharmonized) by the second violin and viola in octaves, seems to act as a kind of refrain. The end of the movement reverts to a transformed version of its first idea, now imbued with a new, noble radiance and superimposed, to begin with, on a long chord of F sharp major.

The *scherzo* third movement is arguably the best, and certainly the clearest and most succinct in structure. Nothing could be more typical of Pizzetti's distinctive kind of pastoral vivacity than the winsomely asymmetrical tune presented at the

outset, in Dorian B flat minor, by the first violin and cello in octaves. Here more clearly than anywhere else one can sense, despite all the obvious differences, that this is indeed the work of the same composer who wrote the *First Quartet* a quarter of century earlier. A switch to a faster tempo introduces an aptly contrasted "trio" section in which hunting-horns again seem to be evoked; but when the movement's initial idea returns, it interacts with a bitonally-clashing countermelody on the viola. In the whimsical coda, material from the trio section returns but then digresses briefly into a more intense

and sustained manner, before abruptly rounding the movement off with a neat "throw-away" gesture. The last movement begins rhetorically, with a fierce, speeded-up version of the five-note pattern that dominated the introduction to the first. This motif plays an even larger part in the finale than it did in the earlier movement; but it alternates, rondo-like, with various more relaxed and lyrical ideas. One of them returns at the very end, freely adapted in broad, "hymnic" terms to end the work in a mood of calm affirmation.

John C.G. Waterhouse

Lajtha Quartet

The Lajtha Quartet, its name taken from that of the distinguished Hungarian composer and expert on folk-music, László Lajtha, was founded in 1990 by the violinist Leila Rásonyi, winner of a special prize at the Jacques Thibaud International Violin Competition in Paris in 1971 and a member of the teaching staff of the Liszt Academy. The other members of the quartet, which ceased playing in the mid-1990s, were the violinist György Albert, the viola-player László Kolozsvári and the cellist László Fenyő.



Ildebrando PIZZETTI String Quartets Lajtha Quartet



Ildebrando PIZZETTI (1880-1968)

String Quartets

String Quartet No. 1 in A major (1906)

- 1** I. Vivace ma sereno
- 2** II. Adagio
- 3** III. Tema con variazioni: Allegretto tranquillo
- 4** IV. Finale

String Quartet No. 2 in D (1932-33)

- 5** I. Molto sostenuto
- 6** II. Adagio
- 7** III. Movimento di scherzo
- 8** IV. Molto concitato

Lajtha Quartet

Leila Rásonyi, Violin I • György Albert, Violin II
László Kolozsvári, Viola • László Fenyő, Cello

Ildebrando Pizzetti (1880-1968)

String Quartet No. 1 in A major (1906) • String Quartet No. 2 in D (1932-33)

Few though they are, the principal chamber works of Ildebrando Pizzetti are among the most important written in Italy this century: they certainly do not deserve the general neglect that has descended upon them since the composer's death. Two of his supreme contributions to the chamber repertoire, the powerful *Violin Sonata* (1918-19) and the radiant *Piano Trio* (1925), are available on Naxos 8.570875. Together with the poignant *Cello Sonata* (1921, written in memory of the composer's first wife), these remarkable, in some ways quasi-operatic pieces marked the culmination of Pizzetti's entire output as an instrumental composer.

If the three major chamber works of 1918-25 date from what has reasonably been regarded as his greatest period, the two string quartets recorded on the present disc belong, respectively, to an earlier and a later phase of his long creative career. The *Quartet in A major*, which is in fact his first, although Pizzetti himself never called it that, is one of his earliest pieces that was in due course published: it was written in 1906, when he was on the threshold of first making his name as a composer in Italy. By the time he wrote the *Quartet in D* in 1932-33 he had become something of an establishment figure in his homeland – increasingly resented by the younger generation, who accused him (not altogether without reason) of self-repetitive conservatism and dogged hostility to the new. Listeners can make up their own minds about the justice or otherwise of such accusations where the *Second Quartet*, as we may as well call it, is concerned.

Although he was still in his mid-twenties when he wrote the *First Quartet*, Pizzetti was already becoming one of the most confidently creative Italian composers of his generation. The work dates from the time when he was starting to collaborate with Italy's most famous living poet and playwright Gabriele d'Annunzio: it was the remarkable incidental music which he wrote in 1905-07 for D'Annunzio's controversial new play *La nave* that first brought him

to widespread public notice in January 1908. Though completed earlier than the *La nave* music, the *First Quartet* was not performed until 1909, and had to, wait until 1920 before it was published in its entirety. Yet, despite this relatively slow start, it can now be seen as one of the most youthfully fresh and charming of all Pizzetti's early compositions. Dating from several years before even his first published opera *Fedra* (1909-12), it is naturally somewhat less operatic in approach than the three main chamber works of 1918-25. Unlike the *Violin Sonata*, *Cello Sonata* and *Piano Trio*, the quartet as a whole has no known extra-musical subject matter, although one of the variations that make up its third movement bears the title *Ninna nanna per la mia piccina* (Lullaby for my baby girl): the *piccina* in question was the composer's eldest child Maria Teresa, who was born while the *First Quartet* was a work in progress.

In all other respects the quartet would appear to be purely abstract in conception, and it is essentially traditional in structure. The first of its four movements is in fairly standard classical sonata form, though the themes often contain modal turns of phrase. For example, the main idea in the first subject, introduced by the viola in bar 3, makes persistent use of D sharps rather than D naturals in an A major context: it is, in other words, in the Lydian mode, and before long there are also passing suggestions of Dorian F sharp minor and Mixolydian A major. Some have seen the resultant fresh, rustic-sounding interweavings of modal melodic phrases as reflecting Pizzetti's experience, in his youth, of the folk-songs of his native province of Emilia, some of which were themselves performed polyphonically. In later life, however, as I can myself testify, he was in the habit of denying that he had ever been influenced by folk music; and he was certainly never a systematic folk-song collector in the way that Holst and Vaughan Williams were in England or Bartók and Kodály were in Hungary.

Be that as it may, the total effect of the first

movement, with its combination of classical form and modally-inflected lyrical material, is not so very far removed from that of certain movements by Dvořák. Its overall sonata outline is clear and easy to follow. The first subject-group unfolds quite expansively, and repeatedly gives rise to flowing, flexible descending lines (mingling duple and triple rhythms) which reveal that another strong and undoubted influence on Pizzetti's modal style was that of Gregorian chant. The arrival of the second subject is marked by an unobtrusive yet firm turn to E major, combined with the introduction for the first time of quietly insistent dotted rhythms. In the last part of the exposition section the key-sense becomes more fluid; but this is offset by the fact that the development section begins with a brief return of the home key, as the opening phrase of the first subject is softly restated by the viola and cello in free canon.

The development section as a whole follows classical precedents in passing through many keys and in interweaving first and second subject material in more-or-less traditional ways. The crucial return of A major at the beginning of the recapitulation is again quiet but unmistakable, and here too the viola and cello bring back the quartet's initial phrase in canon. This time the first subject-group builds up a longer and more emphatic climax than it did in the exposition, before giving place again to the second subject, now transposed into the home key as one would expect. The movement ends with a short, evocative coda pervaded by very free reminiscences of the main first-subject idea, parts of which are now, as already at one point in the development section, sometimes played in inversion and augmentation – upside down and in longer notes than before.

The second movement is a gentle, radiant song without words, in which modal inflections, though not wholly absent, are less widespread than they were in the first movement. The form is freely ternary, although in the middle section the main melodic material is still fairly closely related to that of the first. The arrival of the third section is

marked by a decisive return of the movement's home key of E major and of its opening melody, which is now, however, reintroduced on the cello, passing back to the first violin four bars later, and there are many other changes of detail. Here too there is a coda, in which the central section is briefly recalled. Moreover, both at the end of the middle section itself and in the coda Pizzetti makes fleeting back-references to the initial phrase of the first movement's opening theme.

The third movement begins with a simple, easy-going melody which forms the basis for four strongly contrasted variations, mostly joined together by variant versions of a recurrent cadenza-like linking passage. The first and third variations are fast and dance-like, with vigorous fugal entries at the beginning of the third. The exquisite second variation – muted, and with persistent drones at various levels of the texture – is the above-mentioned *Ninna nanna*, which, partly perhaps for personal reasons, Pizzetti chose to publish separately in 1911 in the Florentine periodical *La Nuova Musica*, nine years before the whole work found its way into print. The last variation brings back phrases from the theme in their original rhythm, but woven into a very different texture in which the above-mentioned linking cadenza also plays a part.

The finale is clearly related to the first movement, not only in general spirit but also in its fairly frequent allusions to the quartet's opening theme, which are inserted, perhaps slightly self-consciously, into a sonata structure whose principal themes are nevertheless new. The movement's own first subject (again mingling duple and triple rhythms) is presented by the first violin after a brief, incisive introduction; the second subject is in due course launched by the viola, in the relatively remote key of F major-minor, under rocking triplet crotchets on the violins. As the movement unfolds, Pizzetti seems concerned to put his technical ingenuity through its paces: the later part of the development juxtaposes slower and faster versions of first subject material; and in the recapitulation